

The First World War Poets – Why are they important?

Traditionally, war poets – people who wrote poetry or less often prose- in the period in 1914 -1918

They are seen as significant writers about vitally important subjects

In a world where every community, village, town and city saw men go to war, a fact recorded in war memorials everywhere

Everyone knew someone, knew of someone going, and a high proportion did not return unscathed

This was not after all a professional war, with certain men signing up to go and fight somewhere far away.

Sometimes in the past men had joined the standing army to escape poverty or lack of prospects, but this war meant a huge movement of men as never seen before

At the beginning – it seemed as if it would all be over by Christmas, and those August days would have seemed a long way away from the war to come.

We look at the poetry from that period as separate – different

When I was teaching – trying to teach English to teenagers – “Poetry” not popular

Even what we would see as the classics would leave them cold long before I got to the mechanics of rhyme, rhythm and pace

They were temporarily silenced by the power of some of these poems

Images of battles, injury mud and gore – something of the terror would come through

This is powerful writing – of a new world – a new most almost mechanical destruction

But at the same time- the survival of the human spirit- the camaraderie, the instinct to survive – the instinct to carry on

People – I was at a conference a few weeks ago – authenticity of the men’s writing – only men experienced this – how could women understand?

Let alone write about it – what this war was really like

They went on to do a presentation about the women war poets and writers

An advert for the FoSM talk in the autumn is that I will be talking about Vera Brittain - a local woman who wrote one of the most important accounts of the war as well as poetry.

But today, we are thinking about those men and women who wrote it as it was

- An ideal
- As it really was
- What made them angry
- What made them desperate

At the beginning of the war – men chose to sign up for the army, volunteer in fact. Maybe they came under pressure from family and friends, or poverty, from patriotism for so many reasons.

One of the earliest poets of the war was the beautiful almost ethereal Rupert Brooke, whose face was immortalised, who wrote about the privilege of fighting for his country, about making a bit of a foreign field forever England

POEM – The Soldier

The irony being that he never actually fought in the War as he died of a fever while travelling to Gallipoli.

But even he began to write of the fear of being taken from his home friends and everything he knew and loved

POEM “I strayed about the deck” p.24 O’Prey

Within a few weeks, months it became obvious that this war was like nothing that had gone before. Gentle careful men began to realise the awfulness of war, the surroundings and everything

POEM Thiepval Wood – Edmund Blunden p.64 Judd

And those who fought

POEM In the Trenches- Isaac Rosenberg p.104 O’Prey

As more and more men were called up, conscripted, made to go and fight – cold reality began to set in with no choice.

Conscientious Objectors were imprisoned and worse, sometimes becoming stretcher bearers on the front line.

Deserters were sometimes shot for their perceived cowardice

And some men got angry - Siegfried Sassoon made a public protest, but he was sent to a medical centre in Scotland – But he wrote

POEM The General p.50 O'Prey

He encouraged and helped another poet – young , invalided out for a short time – Wilfred Owen

Despite his Christianity – confusion about why he was fighting – having chosen to join up – he wrote about the horror of war, pity, desperation

Quote Back of Judd

He was no time server, no coward , but contradictory- bravery – got the Military Cross for killing a large number of the enemy single handed.

But he did not lose his anger or acute observation which he expressed in many of his poems.

POEM Anthem for Doomed Youth p.120 O'Prey

He saw the suffering, the waste and fear- and in his longer poem – Strange Meeting he realises that he has killed men just like himself.

2. But what of the women?

Sassoon dismissed them in his poem “The Glory of Women” as only loving those who fought when they were heroes – or giving men not in uniform white feathers

It is estimated that there were some 2,000 poets published in that war time period – but only 1 quarter were women

Some anthologies don't include any women's poems –or only a token effort

There is a book called Scars on my Heart, which is only women's war poetry brought out by Catherine Reilly in 2006

Female poets had a lot to say, even if they were not allowed to fight, they volunteered to nurse – right on the front line.

Vera Brittain nursed in France – for German prisoners – ‘the world was mad and we were all victims’

POEM “The German Ward” p.114 O’Prey

Certainly – nursing for the patients on both sides was not an easy option – certainly far from the careful laying of a cool hand on a fevered brow –

Instead it was muddy, bloody and dangerous

Those other women, the ones who did not nurse, Manufactured munitions and did the other jobs that the men at front were not there to do, and enjoyed the freedom and money

POEM “War Girls” Jesse Pope, and “Munitions Wages” Madeline Ida Bedford – both on sheet

But this was dangerous work; danger from the Zeppelin raids and the very materials they were handling were dangerous and even deadly

Of course after the war women were sent away from hundreds, thousands of jobs, their purpose, education gone

POEM “The Lament of the Demobilised” Vera Brittain p.116 O’Prey

But for many there was a far greater loss – of husbands, lovers, brothers and friends

POEM “Perhaps” Vera Brittain, on sheets

3. Others who wrote about the War from a distance included those who wanted to recruit men to fight, early in the war when glory was still there to be grasped-

POEM

Who’s for the game, the biggest that’s played,
 The red crashing game of a fight?
 Who’ll grip and tackle the job unafraid?
 And who thinks he’d rather sit tight?
 Who’ll toe the line for the signal to ‘Go!’?
 Who’ll give his country a hand?
 Who wants a turn to himself in the show?
 And who wants a seat in the stand?
 Who knows it won’t be a picnic – not much-

Yet eagerly shoulders a gun?
 Who would much rather come back with a crutch
 Than lie low and be out of the fun?
 Come along, lads –
 But you'll come on all right –
 For there's only one course to pursue,
 Your country is up to her neck in a fight,
 And she's looking and calling for you.

Jessie Pope

Some of these poets were women, keen to send men to fight, making it a condition of their admiration and affection. Men too old to fight themselves also wrote to encourage younger men to join up, to fight.

One of the saddest stories is that of Rudyard Kipling, who was desperately keen that his only son should go and fight, despite his really bad eyesight. He persuaded the army to take him, only for his son to go missing within a very short time. He wrote this

POEM My Boy Jack Rudyard Kipling

A lot has been said about the power of the poets of the first world war. Carol Ann Duffy, Poet laureate, wrote a poem in 2013 imagining that the poets could, by the power of their words, undo all the pain and suffering of those who died in the trenches. Here is her poem

CAROL ANN DUFFY

And to close, one of the best known of all First World War Poems,

POEM "For The Fallen" Laurence Binyon p.136 O'Prey
